

Perceptions and Priorities: Educational Consciousness in Tea Garden and Busty Communities in Darjeeling

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Abstract:

This paper explores the notion of educational consciousness in two distinct community settings of the Darjeeling hills: tea garden communities and busties (non-tea garden) communities. Drawing on household surveys and case studies, the study compares how different socioeconomic conditions, access to educational facilities, and community attitudes shape perceptions and aspirations regarding education. Key indicators such as school accessibility, dropout patterns, reliance on private versus government institutions, and parental involvement were analyzed. The findings indicate that the busty community, with comparatively better access to resources and infrastructure, displays a higher level of educational awareness and investment in schooling. In contrast, tea garden communities face persistent challenges – including economic vulnerability, poor institutional support, and limited exposure – that restrict educational consciousness and attainment. The study concludes that fostering educational awareness, alongside improving infrastructure and policy support, recruitment of more qualified and trained teachers, and community awareness programs, is essential to reducing disparities and ensuring inclusive development across these communities.

Keywords: Educational consciousness, Tea Garden communities, busty communities, educational disparity and Darjeeling hills.

1. Introduction

1.1. Historical background of the tea plantation in Darjeeling

Darjeeling, a district in the Indian state of West Bengal, is widely known as the “Queen of the Hills”. Nestled amidst the towering Mount Kanchanjunga and covered in lush green pine forests, its scenic beauty has long attracted tourists, researchers, and writers. Beyond its breathtaking landscape, Darjeeling is globally renowned for its tea industry, producing some of the finest and most aromatic teas, often referred to as the “Champagne of Teas”. The region’s cool climate, high altitude terrain, and well-drained soil make it an ideal location for tea cultivation, setting the stage for an industry that has shaped its history and socio-economic fabric.

The history of tea production in Darjeeling dates back to 1841, when Archibald Campbell, a British civil surgeon, planted the first tea bushes in the region. Recognising its commercial potential, the British

established large-scale tea plantations, leading to the rapid growth of the industry. Over time, tea estates expanded across the district, and Darjeeling became a key player in the global tea market. However, this expansion required a substantial workforce, leading to the migration of labourers from neighbouring regions such as Nepal, Sikkim and surrounding areas. By 1885, the population in Darjeeling had risen from around 100 in the 1830s to nearly 95,000, largely due to the influx of tea plantation workers. Over time, tea garden settlements evolved into distinct socio-economic communities, dependent on estate management for employment, housing, healthcare, and basic education.

Beyond its tea gardens, the district is also home to busy communities like Lamahatta, where residents engage in agriculture, tourism and small businesses rather than tea plantation work. These communities often have more diverse economic opportunities, influencing educational aspirations and access differently than tea garden communities. These communities are not restricted to a single industry, allowing for greater occupational diversity and economic flexibility. Recently, Lamahatta have seen growth in tourism, impacting their socio-economic structure. While tea garden communities have historically faced economic hardships, low wages and dependence on tea plantation jobs, busy communities like Lamahatta have had relatively better economic flexibility. However, access to quality education, parental educational background, and local educational infrastructure still shape educational consciousness in both communities.

The contrast between these two communities – one deeply tied to an estate-based labour system and the other with relatively independent economic activities – has significant implications for education. While tea garden families have long relied on estate-supported schools and face barriers in pursuing higher education, busy communities navigate their own financial and infrastructural challenges in accessing quality schooling.

This study aims to compare the perceptions, priorities and challenges related to education in tea garden and busy communities, highlighting how socioeconomic conditions, cultural factors and historical influences shape educational consciousness in Darjeeling.

1.2. Research Rationale and Significance

1.2.1. Rationale

Education is a crucial determinant of social mobility and economic progress, yet disparities in access continue to exist within different communities in Darjeeling. While tea garden communities have historically relied on plantation based support systems, busy communities have had greater economic independence but face their own challenges in accessing quality education. Despite various government interventions and policy effort, educational inequalities persist due to factors such as household income, parental awareness, school availability, and infrastructural constraints. The rigid labour structure in tea gardens has created generational dependency on plantation jobs, limiting educational aspirations, whereas busy communities, though more diverse in livelihood options, still struggle with issues like school distance, affordability and quality.

This study seeks to compare and analyse the educational consciousness of these two distinct communities to understand:

1. How socioeconomic status affects educational access and decision-making
2. The role of historical and structural factors in shaping educational mobility
3. Why disparities exist despite government initiatives

4. By examining these aspects, this research aims to highlight gaps in policy implementation and propose strategies for improving educational opportunities for both communities.

1.2.2. Significance

This study holds significance in multiple dimensions:

- a. **Academic contribution:** Adds to the existing body of research on socio-economic factors affecting education in hill communities. Provides a comparative framework for understanding educational disparities in tea garden and busy communities
- b. **Policy relevance:** Offers data-driven insights that can inform policymakers and educators about existing barriers to education in marginalized communities. Helps in designing more targeted interventions for improving access to quality education in tea garden settlements and busy areas
- c. **Social impact:** Creates awareness among local communities about the importance of education and the need to break generational cycles of dependency. Encourages community-led initiatives to support children's education and reduce drop-out rates
- d. **Future research implications:** Open pathways for further studies on intergenerational educational mobility in Darjeeling's rural communities. It can be extended to other areas facing similar educational challenges.

By identifying the challenges and opportunities that shape educational consciousness in these communities, this study aims to contribute to more inclusive and effective educational policies, ensuring that children from both communities receive equitable educational opportunities.

1.3. Educational Consciousness in Tea Garden (Lopchu T.E.) and Busy Communities (Lamahatta)

1.3.1. Understanding Educational consciousness

Educational consciousness refers to the awareness, attitudes, and aspirations individuals and communities hold towards education. It is shaped by multiple factors, including historical context, socioeconomic conditions, cultural values and access to resources.

In the context of tea garden and busy communities in Darjeeling, educational consciousness can be understood through:

- **Historical and socioeconomic influences**
 - **Tea garden communities:** education was historically secondary to labour needs. Generations of workers prioritized employment over formal schooling, leading to low educational aspirations.
 - **Busy community:** With greater occupational diversity, busy community had more exposure to different career paths, which influenced their educational goals.
- **Parental attitude towards education**
 - Families in the tea garden often view education as a means of securing plantation – related jobs rather than an escape from poverty.
 - Busy parents may see education as a pathway to upward mobility, but financial struggles and accessibility challenges can limit aspirations.
- **Government and institutional support**
 - Policies like SSA (Sarva Siksha Abhiyan) and RTE (Right to Education) aim to improve educational access, but implementation gaps persist.
 - Infrastructure in tea gardens remains dependent on estate management, whereas busy areas rely on government-run or private schools.
- Generational shift in educational perceptions

- Younger generations in both communities are more exposed to digital learning and external influences, leading to a shift in educational consciousness.
- Dropout rates remain due to economic pressure and lack of motivation
- **Challenges affecting educational consciousness**
- **Financial constraints:** Education is often counted next to basic necessities.
- **Cultural barriers:** early marriage, family responsibilities, and gender expectations influence schooling decisions.
- **Quality of education:** Poor teacher availability, outdated curricula, and inadequate school facilities impact learning outcomes.

Understanding educational consciousness is crucial for designing effective interventions that encourage long-term investment in education. By addressing both structural and mindset-related barriers, policymakers and educators can foster a more education-oriented culture in both tea garden and busy communities.

1.3.2. Educational challenges in tea garden communities

Despite policy interventions and efforts to improve educational infrastructure, many children from tea garden communities continue to experience barriers in accessing quality education and also the lack of awareness about the long-term benefit of education. Factors such as low household income, limited school facilities, and dependence on tea estate management for basic services contribute to low educational aspirations among both the parents and children.

This study aims to explore how the historical and economic factors shape educational consciousness in tea garden communities. Many families prioritize immediate income over long-term education, leading to intergenerational cycles of limited educational attainment. While running tea gardens provides some stability, workers still struggle with educational motivation and access to quality schooling.

By analysing attitudes, aspirations, and barriers to education, this study compares the level of educational consciousness in tea garden communities versus busy communities, identifying factors that influence educational priorities.

1.3.3. Educational challenges in Busy communities

Unlike tea garden communities, busy communities in Darjeeling are not dependent on a single industry for livelihood. With diverse sources of income and relatively better economic stability, families in busy areas often have higher educational aspirations for their children. However, despite having better financial conditions, educational consciousness varies based on factors such as parental education levels, access to quality education, and societal attitudes towards education.

Some families prioritize formal education and higher studies, while others struggle with a generational mindset that emphasize immediate employment over long-term academic pursuits. Additionally, disparities in access to quality teachers, tuition and competitive academic environments impact how students and parents perceive the importance of higher education.

This study will compare educational consciousness in tea garden and busy communities, analysing how socioeconomic conditions, cultural values and historical influences shape perceptions of education in both settings.

1.3.4. Key comparative factors influencing educational awareness

Several key factors influence educational consciousness among communities living in tea garden areas and busy areas of Darjeeling. These factors can be broadly categorized into socioeconomic conditions, educational infrastructure, cultural perspectives and governmental policies.

- **Socioeconomic conditions**
- **Income levels:** A study on tea plantation workers in Kurseong, Darjeeling, found that children often drop out of school to migrate to cities for better employment opportunities, highlighting the financial instability affecting their education (Saha, 2023).
- **Parental education:** Research indicates that parents with low income and education levels contribute to higher drop-out rates among students in rural areas of District Darjeeling (Chakrabarti, 2024).
- **Educational infrastructure and access**
- **School availability:** Many tea gardens are located in remote areas where educational facilities are scarce, perpetuating cycles of illiteracy and limiting opportunities for skill development among workers and their children (Halmaritea, 2023).
- **Quality of schools and teachers:** Teachers in rural schools often receive low salaries, which can lead to decreased motivation and affect the quality of education delivered (Rawat and Chettri, 2013).
- **Cultural and social perspectives on education**
- **Gender and Education:** Factors such as early marriage and family issues contribute to high drop-out rates among girls in rural areas of the district (Chakrabarti, 2024).
- **Language barriers:** The diverse ethnic backgrounds in tea garden communities, including Bengali, Nepali, Adivasi and Hindi speakers, often lead to language difficulties in formal education settings.
- **Government policies and support**
- **Implementation challenges:** Despite the presence of government programs aimed at supporting education, issues like lack of proper infrastructure and insufficient teacher compensation hinder effective implementation in rural areas (Rawat and Chettri, 2013)

1.3.5. Challenges in fostering educational consciousness

- A. **Economic barriers:** Poverty and the necessity for child labour are significant factors leading to school drop-outs among children of tea plantation workers, as they migrate to cities seeking better employment opportunities to support their families financially (Saha, 2023)
- B. **Infrastructural barriers:** The absence of hostels and proper transport facilities in rural schools of Darjeeling discourages students from distant places from continuing their education (Rawat and Chettri, 2013).
- C. **Social and cultural barriers:** Traditional mindset and lack of motivation among parents in rural areas contribute to irregular attendance and low aspirations among students, impacting their educational attainment (Rawat, n.d).
- D. **Policy implementation challenges:** Lack of basic infrastructure like medical, education and other facilities in tea plantation areas has resulted in adverse outcomes, including school dropouts among children (Sonar, 2024).
- E. **Difficult terrain and accessibility:** Remote villages many lack proper roads, making it hard for children to reach school, thereby gradually losing interest in studies.
- F. **Weather conditions:** Harsh weather, landslides, heavy rainfall, freezing cold and windy seasons disrupt schooling.
- G. **Teacher availability:** Many teachers are unwilling to work in remote areas due to a lack of facilities.

2. Literature Review

According to the 2011 Census, Darjeeling district ranked sixth in the state in terms of literacy. However, this ranking could have been higher if educational conditions in rural areas had been improved. Despite

the significant economic contribution of the tea industry, the region continues to be overlooked, as seen in the persistent issues of poverty, low wages, and educational underdevelopment. Although wages are low, many parents allocate a portion of their income toward education. This suggests that an increase in wages could potentially lead to better educational outcomes (Rai, 2023).

While low wages remain a critical concern, the challenges faced by tea garden workers are multifaceted and require comprehensive solutions. These solutions must involve various stakeholders, including the government, plantation owners, and civil society. For the tea industry to become more equitable and sustainable, measures such as improving working conditions, ensuring better healthcare, and promoting education and skill development are essential (Halmaritea, 2023).

A study by Roy (2021) found that 53.33% of students dropped out due to financial difficulties, while 23% struggled with inadequate transportation facilities. Additionally, 14.67% of students lacked parental support, and 13.67% faced challenges due to unsupportive teachers in schools in Assam. Chakrabarti (2024) highlighted that the rising dropout rates are linked to systemic inefficiencies, societal shortcomings, and flaws in educational administration. She also noted that a lack of interest among students, combined with insufficient guidance, contributes to poor performance in board exams, ultimately forcing students to leave school.

Rawat and Chettri (2013) examined the impact of government-provided educational facilities and observed that, while these initiatives have attracted more students, parental awareness and encouragement play a crucial role in ensuring children's continued education. However, the educational attainment in rural Darjeeling remains slow due to a lack of parents' involvement. Sonar (2024) emphasized the importance of tea plantations in the national economy, particularly in Darjeeling, which is a major tea-producing region. However, the industry has faced multiple crises, including poor yield, ageing tea bushes, ineffective garden management, ownership disputes, and reliance on debt-heavy funding strategies. These challenges have led to the closure of 22 tea plantations in the district, significantly affecting permanent workers. As a consequence, widespread issues such as hunger, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, school dropouts, malnutrition, child labour, and forced migration have become prevalent in these regions. Bala (2016), in her study on higher education in India, concluded that access to higher education and Gross Enrollment Ratios are notably lower in eastern states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Assam, which rank among the least literate regions. Similarly, Tamang (2017), while researching the impact of closed tea gardens, observed that the socio-economic conditions have gone from bad to worse. As a result, the conditions of the closed tea garden workers are worrisome.

Busty communities in Darjeeling have relied on agriculture, cattle rearing, cash crops like cardamom and timber. Recently, the concept of village tourism has become a good source of income for them. Homestay tourism has been recognized for its positive impact on improving socio-economic conditions in rural areas. A study on the Darjeeling hills highlights that homestay tourism plays a crucial role in creating employment and generating income, enabling families to afford higher education for their children (Rai, 2023). Moreover, ecotourism serves as a sustainable economic opportunity, benefiting local communities by providing jobs, generating revenue, enhancing skill development, and empowering women.

Rural tourism, a form of nature-based tourism, showcases rural lifestyles, culture, art, and heritage, offering both social and economic advantages to local populations. It exists in various forms and promotes cultural exchange by connecting people from different backgrounds, religions, languages, and ways of life. In addition to boosting employment, rural tourism contributes to social cohesion, cultural awareness, and education, making it a significant driver of economic growth worldwide (Rawat, n.d.).

Although the existing literature, though limited, examines the economic conditions of two distinct communities, tea garden workers who rely on tea estate management and busty residents who depend on tourism or agriculture, the impact of these economic differences on education remains largely unexplored. The complex relationship between economic status and educational outcomes requires further investigation.

3. Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature on educational access and socioeconomic factors in rural communities, limited studies specifically examine the educational consciousness among tea garden and busty communities in the Darjeeling Hills. Existing research largely focuses on general rural education but fails to differentiate the unique socioeconomic conditions of tea garden workers and busty populations. Furthermore, while studies highlight the role of economic conditions in shaping educational aspirations, the impact of tourism as an economic driver remains underexplored in the context of Lamahatta busty. The dual effect of tourism – boosting household income but also reducing long-term educational motivation among youth – has not been adequately studied. This creates a critical gap in understanding whether economic upliftment through tourism leads to higher educational attainment or causes early school dropouts due to quick earning opportunities. Additionally, prior research does not sufficiently address the comparative educational priorities of tea garden and busty communities, especially in politically influenced regions. Given the absence of comprehensive, empirical data comparing the two within the Darjeeling hills, this study aims to bridge the gap by analyzing how economic opportunities, particularly tourism, shape educational consciousness and decision-making in these communities. Additionally, this study aims to explore how stable tea garden incomes and fluctuating tourism earnings influence educational attainment.

4. Research objectives and questions

4.1. Research objectives

1. To examine the level of educational awareness among tea garden and busty communities in Darjeeling
2. To analyze the impact of socioeconomic factors on educational access and aspirations in these communities
3. To identify key barriers to educational attainment, including geographical challenges, economic constraints, and socio-cultural influences
4. To compare dropout rates and alternative schooling choices between tea garden and busty communities
5. To assess the role of government policies and local educational infrastructure in shaping educational opportunities
6. To propose strategies to enhance educational participation and reduce disparities between tea garden and busty communities.

4.2. Research questions

1. What is the level of educational awareness among tea garden and busty communities in Darjeeling?
2. How does socioeconomic status influence educational aspirations and access in these communities?
3. What are the major challenges faced by students in these regions in continuing their education?
4. How do geographical factors (e.g. remote locations, transportation issues) impact educational access?
5. Are there significant differences in dropout rates between tea garden and busty communities?
6. What alternative schooling options (if any) are students in these communities pursuing?

7. How effective are government policies and local educational programs in addressing educational disparities?
8. What measures can be taken to improve educational access and awareness among tea garden and busy communities?

5. Research Methodology

5.1. Population and Sampling

The target population includes the current head of the household, along with school-going children and youth.

A random sampling method will be used due to the mixed population structure and to ensure unbiased representations. The study will include 150 households from each community, i.e. Lopchu tea garden and Lamahatta busy.

5.2. Data collection methods

Primary data will be collected using:

- Structured questionnaire focusing on educational access, awareness, dropout rates, parental education levels and aspirations.
- Interviews with selected students and parents to capture qualitative insights.

This study relies exclusively on primary data to ensure firsthand accuracy and a direct reflection of community realities. Secondary data has been referred to only for background understanding and has not been used in the core data collection process.

5.3. Variables and indicators

- **Independent variable:** Socioeconomic status (measured using a modified Kuppuswamy scale)
- **Dependent variables:** Educational consciousness, measured through indicators such as school enrolment, awareness of educational schemes, aspirations and academic continuity.

5.4. Research Design

This study adopts a comparative descriptive research design to explore educational consciousness among the two distinct communities, i.e. tea garden and non-tea garden (busy) communities in the Darjeeling district. The design allows for a comparative analysis of access to education, awareness levels, and influencing socioeconomic factors in these two populations.

5.5. Study area

The research will be conducted in selected areas, specifically the tea garden, i.e. Lopchu tea garden community and in Lamahatta, representing the busy (non-tea garden) community. These areas were chosen based on population density, access to educational facilities and socioeconomic diversity. In the region, only one higher secondary school serves both communities, making it a crucial factor in assessing educational accessibility and awareness. Additionally, the socioeconomic conditions differ between the two communities – one dependent on stable income from the tea garden, while the other experiences fluctuating earnings from tourism and agriculture.

5.6. Data Analysis Approach

The data collected through structured interviews and surveys will be analyzed using a combination of manual interpretation and basic statistical tools such as Microsoft Excel. This will ensure both clarity and accuracy while handling the sample size of 300.

Quantitative data – such as years of schooling, dropout rates, and access to educational facilities will be organized into frequency tables, percentages, and cross tabulations. Visual aids like bar graphs and pie

charts will be used for clearer presentation. Qualitative data from open-ended questions and interviews will undergo thematic analysis, allowing the study to highlight life experiences, community challenges and personal perspectives on education.

This combined approach enables the study to balance numerical representation with contextual depth, providing a holistic understanding of educational consciousness in the selected communities.

6. Data Analysis and Findings

Table 1: Descriptive statistics: frequency distribution percentage, mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum

Variables	Background Characteristics	Busty		Tea Garden		Total	
		Sample (n)	%	Sample (n)	%	Sample (n)	%
Age	28-34 years	16	10.67	29	19.33	45	15.00
	35-44 years	77	51.33	74	49.33	151	50.33
	45-54 years	48	32.00	41	27.33	89	29.67
	55-64 years	8	5.33	6	4.00	14	4.67
	65 and above	1	0.67	0	0.00	1	0.33
Mean $\pm$ SD Min & Max		42.85 $\pm$ 7.84, 29 & 89		41.46, $\pm$ 7.21, 28 & 64		42.15, $\pm$ 7.55, 28 & 89	
Gender	Male	129	86.00	132	88.00	261	87.00
	Female	21	14.00	18	12.00	39	13.00
Highest level of education	Primary	63	42.00	31	20.67	94	31.33
	Secondary	69	46.00	89	59.33	158	52.67
	Higher Secondary	14	9.33	24	16.00	38	12.67
	Graduation	4	2.67	6	4.00	10	3.33
Occupations	Farmers	42	28.00	13	8.67	55	18.33
	Tea Garden Worker	0	0.00	78	52.00	78	26.00
	Daily Labour	42	28.00	3	2.00	45	15.00
	Private	28	18.67	39	26.00	67	22.33
	Factory	1	0.67	0	0.00	1	0.33
	Carpenter	0	0.00	3	2.00	3	1.00
	Business	1	0.67	1	0.67	2	0.67
	Govt. Employee	24	16.00	12	8.00	36	12.00
Monthly income	Others	12	8.00	1	0.67	13	4.33
	Less than 5000	5	3.33	19	12.67	24	8.00
	5001-10000	64	42.67	101	67.33	165	55.00
	10001-20000	44	29.33	19	12.67	63	21.00
	Above 20000	37	24.67	11	7.33	48	16.00

Mean $\pm$ SD Min & Max		14225.33 $\pm$ 7784.01, 4500 & 35000		9182.67 $\pm$ 5789.94, 3500 & 32000		11704, $\pm$ 7299.19, 3500 & 35000	
Number of children	One Parity	89	59.33	109	72.67	198	66.00
	Two Parity	57	38.00	38	25.33	95	31.67
	Three Parity	4	2.67	3	2.00	7	2.33
Mean $\pm$ SD Min & Max		1.43 $\pm$ 0.55, 1 & 3		1.29 $\pm$ 0.50, 1 & 3		1.36, $\pm$ 0.53, 1 & 3	
Child school types	Government	87	58.00	87	58.00	174	58.00
	Private	57	38.00	58	38.67	115	38.33
	Government and Private	6	4.00	5	3.33	11	3.67
Distance to child's school	1-3 Km	72	48.00	98	65.33	170	56.67
	3-6 Km	57	38.00	46	30.67	103	34.33
	Above 6	21	14.00	6	4.00	27	9.00
Mean $\pm$ SD Min & Max		4.04 $\pm$ 2.06, 1 & 9		2.83 $\pm$ 1.72, 1 & 8		3.43, $\pm$ 1.99, 1 & 9	
Mode of transport to school	Walking	92	61.33	119	79.33	211	70.33
	Public	17	11.33	25	16.67	42	14.00
	Private	41	27.33	6	4.00	47	15.67
Access to child tuition	No	120	80.00	45	30.00	165	55.00
	Yes	20	13.33	0	0.00	20	6.67
	Yes affordable	4	2.67	65	43.33	69	23.00
	Yes, but expensive	6	4.00	40	26.67	46	15.33
Access to digital /online education	No	13	8.67	147	98.00	160	53.33
	Yes, but a poor network	137	91.33	1	0.67	138	46.00
	Yes, with good internet	0	0.00	2	1.33	2	0.67
Financial constraints on education	No	8	5.33	87	58.00	95	31.67
	Yes, for all children	142	94.67	0	0.00	142	47.33
	Yes, for some my child	0	0.00	63	42.00	63	21.00
Household dropout	No	134	89.33	149	99.33	283	94.33
	Yes	16	10.67	1	0.67	17	5.67
Government educational assistance	No	122	81.33	143	95.33	265	88.33
	Yes	28	18.67	7	4.67	35	11.67
	No	0	0.00	24	16.00	24	8.00

Learning and wanting to study	Yes	150	100.00	126	84.00	276	92.00
Education for a better job	No	6	4.00	27	18.00	33	11.00
	Yes	144	96.00	123	82.00	267	89.00
Education necessary future	No	100	66.67	150	100.00	250	83.33
	Yes	50	33.33	0	0.00	50	16.67
Financial gain invests in education	No	144	96.00	141	94.00	285	95.00
	Yes	6	4.00	9	6.00	15	5.00
Child helping with household work	No	118	78.67	150	100.00	268	89.33
	Yes	32	21.33	0	0.00	32	10.67
Higher education & economic hardship	No	143	95.33	31	20.67	174	58.00
	Yes	7	4.67	119	79.33	126	42.00
Financial difficulties	No	18	12.00	47	31.33	65	21.67
	Yes	132	88.00	103	68.67	235	78.33
Distance and lack of transportation	No	104	69.33	122	81.33	226	75.33
	Yes	46	30.67	28	18.67	74	24.67
Poor school infrastructure	No	150	100.00	132	88.00	282	94.00
	Yes	0	0.00	18	12.00	18	6.00
Lack of adequate teachers	No	51	34.00	92	61.33	143	47.67
	Yes	99	66.00	58	38.67	157	52.33
Household responsibility	No	17	11.33	122	81.33	139	46.33
	Yes	133	88.67	28	18.67	161	53.67
Lack of awareness	No	55	36.67	116	77.33	171	57.00
	Yes	95	63.33	34	22.67	129	43.00
Government schemes in education	No	45	30.00	51	34.00	96	32.00
	Yes, and well	0	0.00	3	2.00	3	1.00
	Not aware	105	70.00	96	64.00	201	67.00
Obstacles to education access	No	143	95.33	5	3.33	148	49.33
	Yes	7	4.67	145	96.67	152	50.67
Hilly terrain's effect on education	No	66	44.00	2	1.33	68	22.67
	Yes significantly	0	0.00	48	32.00	48	16.00
	Yes somewhat	84	56.00	100	66.67	184	61.33

Extreme weather	No	41	27.33	0	0.00	41	13.67
	Yes frequently	0	0.00	27	18.00	27	9.00
	Yes occasionally	109	72.67	123	82.00	232	77.33
Solution to improve education	Improved teacher quality	0	0.00	3	2.00	3	1.00
	More scholarship	150	100.00	0	0.00	150	50.00
	More scholarships and	0	0.00	147	98.00	147	49.00
Primary role in improving educational opportunity	Government	0	0.00	2	1.33	2	0.67
	Schools and teachers	150	100.00	148	98.67	298	99.33
Source: Field Survey 2025							

Table 2: Chi-square test (association between type of community and various education factors)

Variables	Background Characteristics	Busty %	Tea Garden %	P Values
Age	28-34 years	35.6	64.4	Pearson $\chi^2(4) = 5.6514$ Pr = 0.227
	35-44 years	51	49	
	45-54 years	53.9	46.1	
	55-64 years	57.1	42.9	
	65 and above	100	0	
Gender	Male	49.4	50.6	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 0.2653$ Pr = 0.607
	Female	53.8	46.2	
Highest level of education	Primary	67	33	Pearson $\chi^2(3) = 16.4568$ Pr = 0.001
	Secondary	43.7	56.3	
	Higher Secondary	36.8	63.2	
	Graduation	40	60	
Occupations	Farmers	76.4	23.6	Pearson $\chi^2(8) = 146.2046$ Pr = 0.000
	Tea Garden Worker	0	100	
	Daily Labour	93.3	6.7	
	Private	41.8	58.2	
	Factory	100	0	
	Carpenter	0	100	
	Business	50	50	
	Govt. Employee	66.7	33.3	
	Others	92.3	7.7	
Monthly income	Less than 5000	20.8	79.2	Pearson $\chi^2(3) = 40.4676$ Pr = 0.000
	50001-10000	38.8	61.2	
	10001-20000	69.8	30.2	
	Above 20000	77.1	22.9	

Number of children	One Parity	44.9	55.1	Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 5.9631$ Pr = 0.051
	Two Parity	60	40	
	Three Parity	57.1	42.9	
Child school types	Government	50	50	Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 0.0996$ Pr = 0.951
	Private	49.6	50.4	
	Government and Private	54.5	45.5	
Distance to child's school	1-3 Km	42.4	57.6	Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 13.4846$ Pr = 0.001
	3-6 Km	55.3	44.7	
	Above 6	77.8	22.2	
Mode of transport to school	Walking	43.6	56.4	Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 31.0426$ Pr = 0.000
	Public	40.5	59.5	
	Private	87.2	12.8	
Access to child tuition	No	72.7	27.3	Pearson $\chi^2(3) = 133.1489$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	100	0	
	Yes affordable	5.8	94.2	
	Yes, but expensive	13	87	
Access to digital /online education	No	8.1	91.9	Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 248.2540$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes, but a poor network	99.3	0.7	
	Yes, with good internet	0	100	
Financial constraints on education	No	8.4	91.6	Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 270.6947$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes, for all children	100	0	
	Yes, for some my child	0	100	
Household dropout	No	47.3	52.7	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 14.0303$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	94.1	5.9	
Government educational assistance	No	46	54	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 14.2642$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	80	20	
Learning and wanting to study	No	0	100	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 26.0870$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	54.3	45.7	
Education for a better job	No	18.2	81.8	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 15.0153$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	53.9	46.1	
Education necessary future	No	40	60	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 60.0000$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	100	0	
Financial gain invests in education	No	50.5	49.5	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 0.6316$ Pr = 0.427
	Yes	40	60	
Child helping with household work	No	44	56	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 35.8209$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	100	0	
	No	82.2	17.8	

Higher education & economic hardship	Yes	5.6	94.4	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 171.6475$ Pr = 0.000
Financial difficulties	No	27.7	72.3	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 16.5172$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	56.2	43.8	
Distance and lack of transportation	No	46	54	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 5.8120$ Pr = 0.016
	Yes	62.2	37.8	
Poor school infrastructure	No	53.2	46.8	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 19.1489$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	0	100	
Lack of adequate teachers	No	35.7	64.3	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 22.4623$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	63.1	36.9	
Household responsibility	No	12.2	87.8	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 147.7948$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	82.6	17.4	
Lack of awareness	No	32.2	67.8	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 50.6052$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	73.6	26.4	
Government schemes in education	No	46.9	53.1	Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 3.7780$ Pr = 0.151
	Yes, and well	0	100	
	Not aware	52.2	47.8	
Obstacles to education access	No	96.6	3.4	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 253.9651$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes	4.6	95.4	
Hilly terrain's effect on education	No	97.1	2.9	Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 109.6266$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes significantly	0	100	
	Yes somewhat	45.7	54.3	
Extreme weather	No	100	0	Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 68.8448$ Pr = 0.000
	Yes frequently	0	100	
	Yes occasionally	47	53	
Solution to improve education	Improved teacher quality	0	100	Pearson $\chi^2(2) = 300.0000$ Pr = 0.000
	More scholarship	100	0	
	More scholarships and	0	100	
Primary role in improving educational opportunity	Government	0	100	Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 2.0134$ Pr = 0.156
	Schools and teachers	50.3	49.7	
Source: Field Survey 2025				

6.1.Perceptions of education in tea garden communities

Table 1 shows that tea garden households were mainly dependent on plantation labour (52%), with lower monthly incomes on average compared to busy household. Even with these economic constraints, the community displayed strong motivation for education. As Table 2 indicates, 82% of parents agreed that education is needed for better employment, and all respondents said it was essential for a better future. Dropout rates in tea garden households were low (less than 1%), which reflects parental commitment to

keeping children in school. Also, 43.3% reported that private tuition is affordable. However, Table 3 highlights the serious challenges, like 92% of the households having no access to digital education, and economic hardships limit their higher education.

Tea garden families strongly value education, but progress to higher education is held back by low income, poor digital access and structural barriers such as hilly terrain and poor infrastructure.

Table 3: Comparative analysis: level of educational consciousness between the tea garden and busy communities.

Variables	Background Characteristics	Busy (%)	Tea Garden (%)
Highest level of education	Primary	67	33
	Secondary	43.7	56.3
	Higher Secondary	36.8	63.2
	Graduation	40	60
Child school types	Government	50	50
	Private	49.6	50.4
	Government and Private	54.5	45.5
Distance to child's school	1-3 Km	42.4	57.6
	3-6 Km	55.3	44.7
	Above 6	77.8	22.2
Mode of transport to school	Walking	43.6	56.4
	Public	40.5	59.5
	Private	87.2	12.8
Access to child tuition	No	72.7	27.3
	Yes	100	0
	Yes affordable	5.8	94.2
	Yes, but expensive	13	87
Access to digital /online education	No	8.1	91.9
	Yes, but a poor network	99.3	0.7
	Yes, with good internet	0	100
Financial constraints on education	No	8.4	91.6
	Yes, for all children	100	0
	Yes, for some my child	0	100
Household dropout	No	47.3	52.7
	Yes	94.1	5.9
Government educational assistance	No	46	54
	Yes	80	20
Financial difficulties	No	27.7	72.3
	Yes	56.2	43.8
Distance and lack of transportation	No	46	54
	Yes	62.2	37.8

Poor school infrastructure	No	53.2	46.8
	Yes	0	100
Lack of adequate teachers	No	35.7	64.3
	Yes	63.1	36.9
Household responsibility	No	12.2	87.8
	Yes	82.6	17.4
Lack of awareness	No	32.2	67.8
	Yes	73.6	26.4
Government schemes in education	No	46.9	53.1
	Yes, and well	0	100
	Not aware	52.2	47.8
Obstacles in education access	No	96.6	3.4
	Yes	4.6	95.4
Hilly terrain's effect on education	No	97.1	2.9
	Yes significantly	0	100
	Yes somewhat	45.7	54.3
Extreme weather	No	100	0
	Yes frequently	0	100
	Yes occasionally	47	53

Source: Field Survey, 2025

6.2.Perceptions of education in busy communities

Busy households, as shown in Table 1, show more occupational diversity, like farming, daily wage labour, private jobs and tourism. Though their average monthly income is higher than tea garden workers but this has not necessarily resulted in better schooling outcomes. Table 2 indicates that 96% of parents agreed that education is important, but dropout rates are alarmingly high, i.e. 10.7%. 94.7% of the respondents could not educate their children equally due to financial difficulty. Table 3 highlights that 63% of busy households are not aware of government schemes related to education, suggesting a lack of information. Further, 80% of the children do not receive tuition, and additionally, household responsibilities reduce their time for studies.

6.3.Comparative analysis of educational aspirations

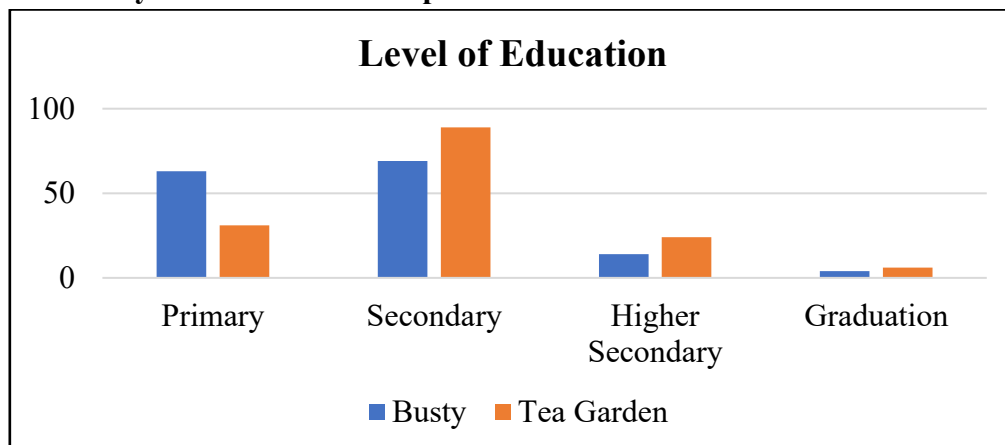


Figure 1. Level of Education

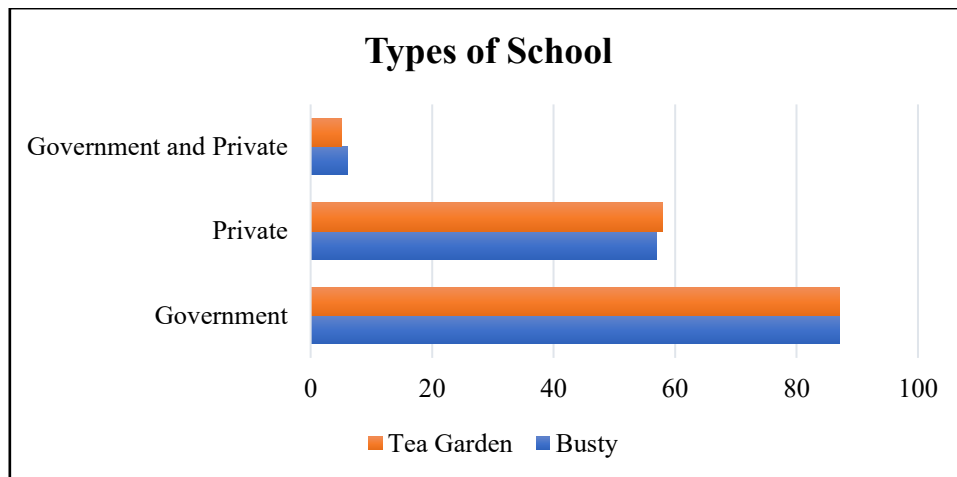


Figure 2. Types of school

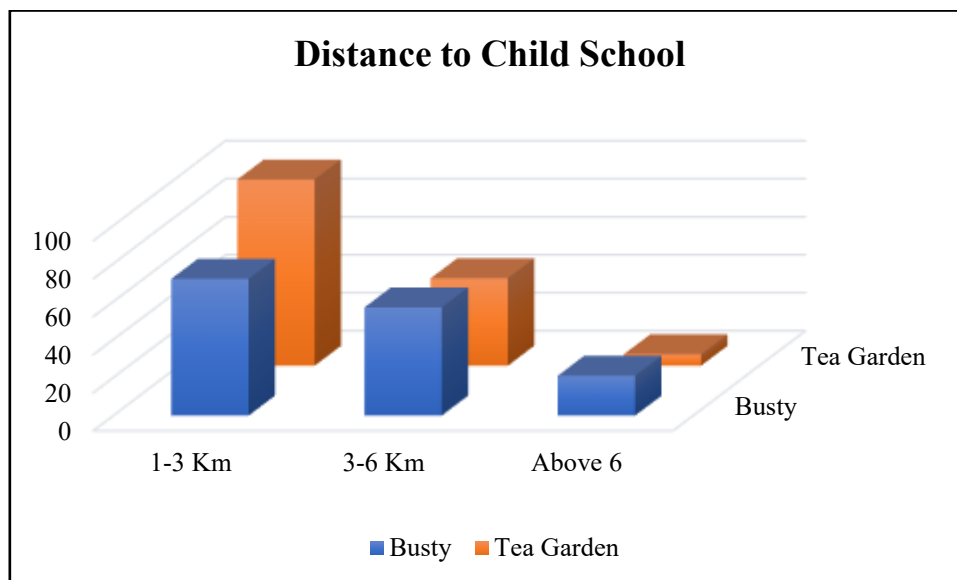


Figure 3. Distance to child's school

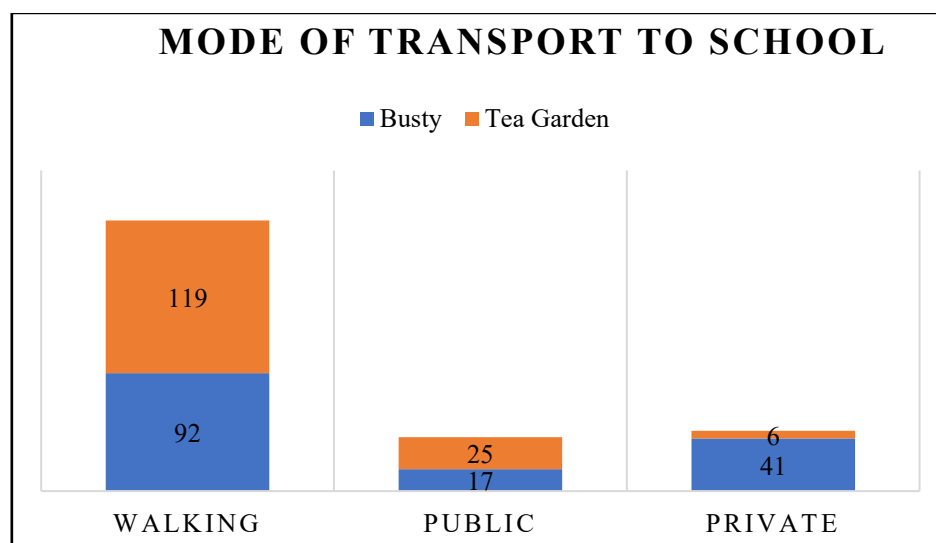


Figure 4. Mode of transportation to school

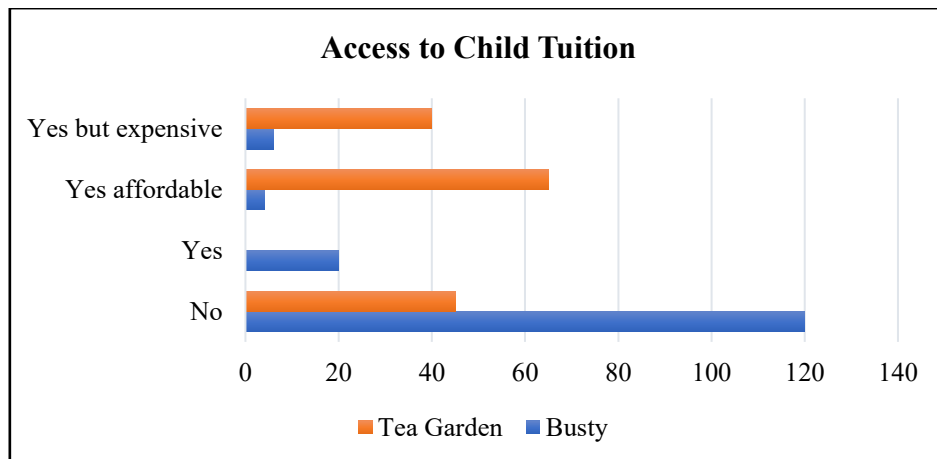


Figure 5. Access to child tuition

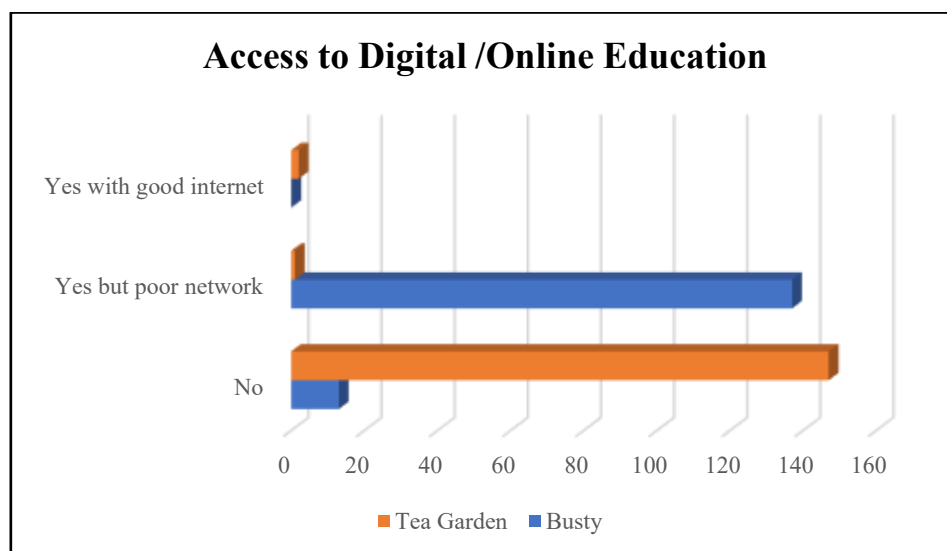


Figure 6. Access to online education

6.4. Major barriers to educational awareness and prioritization

The study revealed that the barriers to education were not the same for the two communities. Table 2 shows that tea garden households faced more structural challenges. For example, 12 % reported poor school infrastructure, while many pointed to hilly terrain and extreme weather as serious obstacles. Almost all tea garden households lack digital access, which creates a major divide in terms of modern learning opportunities.

On the contrary, busty households struggled more with economic and household-level issues. According to Table 1, 94.7% of busty families reported financial constraints, and 21.3 % said children had to take up household responsibilities, which directly affected their schooling. Table 3 also highlights that 63% of busty households were not aware of government schemes, limiting their ability to take advantage of available support.

Despite these differences, some common barriers exist in both communities. The shortage of qualified teachers was 52.3% overall, and very limited government assistance, where only 11.7% received support.

Interpretation: Tea garden households are mainly restricted by structural and geographical barriers, while busy households face financial stress and low awareness. In both settings, these challenges limit the ability of families to prioritize education and pass on its value to the next generation.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

7.1.Key insights from the study

The findings of this study highlight that both tea garden and busy households in Darjeeling place strong value on education as a pathway for mobility, yet their experience are shaped by distinct socioeconomic and structural realities. Tea garden communities demonstrated stronger school retention and access to tuition, but suffered from near-total digital exclusion, poor infrastructure and geographical barriers. Busy households, however, showed higher dropout rates, more financial stress and greater reliance on children for household responsibilities, despite slightly higher average income and better digital access.

These results resonate with earlier studies on rural and plantation communities in India, which emphasizes how low income, occupational dependence and social isolation reinforce intergenerational disadvantage in education. The sharp digital divide observed in tea gardens echoes national-level findings that rural and economically weaker sections remain excluded from technology-enabled learning. Similarly, the lack of awareness among busy households aligns with research showing that information poverty is as critical as financial poverty in limiting educational progress.

Overall, the results suggest that while educational aspirations remain high across both communities, the barriers are community-specific: structural in tea gardens and household-based in busy settlements. This duality indicates that uniform interventions may not be sufficient; instead, context-sensitive approaches are needed to address both sets of challenges.

7.2.Policy implications and recommendations

The findings of this study point towards the need for differentiated and context-specific interventions to address the educational challenges faced by tea garden and busy communities. Based on the results, the following policy implications and recommendations are suggested:

a. Digital inclusion in tea gardens

With nearly 92% of tea garden households lacking digital access, targeted investment in internet connectivity, community learning centres, and provision of low-cost devices is crucial to bridge the digital divide.

b. Financial assistance and awareness in busy communities

Since 94.7% of busy households reported financial constraints and 63% lacked awareness of schemes, government and NGOs must expand scholarship programs, provide fee waivers and organize awareness drives to ensure that families can access existing benefits.

c. Improving Teacher availability and quality

Both communities highlighted shortages of qualified teachers. Policy efforts should prioritize teacher recruitment, training and retention in rural and plantation areas to raise learning standards.

d. Strengthening school infrastructure

Investment in safe buildings, adequate classrooms, and transportation facilities is necessary, especially in tea garden areas where geography and weather act as major obstacles.

e. Community engagement and support mechanisms

Local institutions, schools, and panchayats should work together to reduce household burdens on children,

provide flexible learning support, and create an enabling environment where education is prioritized.

8. Summary

Policy interventions must go beyond a one size fits all model. While tea gardens need structural and technological support, bustling communities require financial relief and awareness-building measures. Addressing these context-specific needs will contribute to reducing disparities and ensuring that educational aspirations can translate into real opportunities.

Ethical considerations

All participants will be informed about the purpose of the study. Informed consents will be taken before data collection. Identities will be kept confidential, and data will be used strictly for academic purposes.

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